

## REVIEW: *Beautiful Brahms*

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Brahms is very much a musician's musician. There are no populist fireworks, no overt drama. What he has are gloriously understated melodies, complex but seamless key changes and intricate voice writing.

All these and more were on show at the Birmingham Bach Choir Beautiful Brahms concert at the CBSO Centre on 1<sup>st</sup> July. The opening three songs from *Fest und Gedenkspruce* had strong similarities to his famous Requiem. Here, there was a fine balance between the unaccompanied choral parts with the intricately woven melodic lines creating a lovely breadth of sound, the soaring sopranos in the second song providing a wonderful moment.

The second group of songs *Zwei Motetten* was much more dense in character and ably handled by the choir, although, as in the first unaccompanied group, the pitch was not always entirely secure. Particularly noticeable here, and throughout the concert, was the strong dynamic discipline that director Paul Spicer elicited from the choir, with the controlled diminuendos a striking feature.

After the interval the songs, beautifully accompanied by John Thwaites, were much lighter in nature and again the dynamic phrasing was exceptional. The interplay between the tenors and sopranos toward the end of the first song of *Drei Quartette* really stood out.

In *Fünf Gesänge* the precision singing we had heard throughout was particularly in evidence and the subtle mood shift in the third song was striking.

*Warum* from the final set perhaps summed all up – the lyricism, complex harmonic structure and sudden changes amid wide-ranging dynamics being expertly handled by the choir.

Pianist John Thwaites provided a contrast in each half with three *Intermezzi*, split between the halves of the concert. As with the choir, he constantly highlighted the melodies to fine effect, particularly in the middle register, amidst the complexity of the writing. His sense of phrase was immaculate and switches of musical character well defined.

A whole concert of Brahms would not be everyone's choice, but it was a brave and enjoyable one by the choir!